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Equal but Different: contradictions in the development of gender identity in the 1990s

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ABSTRACT *At the present time, youngsters develop gender identities in a context in which contradictory discourses exist on femininity and masculinity. They have to accommodate both the fact that gender is an important structuring category in society and the fact that many people currently consider gender inequality to be undesirable. This article argues that an understanding of the ambivalences in current discourses on gender provides the key to the development of more effective feminist strategies in education. This tenet is illustrated by means of interpreting the data of two studies on recent curricular experiments—one on women's history and one on information and computer literacy—in which girls and boys in secondary education talked and wrote about their views on gender equality/inequality and the meaning thereof in their personal lives.*

> Luckily we live at a nice time when women and men have the same rights.
>
> I think that people act fairly these days. Only an old-fashioned boss who's never heard about equal opportunities would prefer to appoint a boy rather than a girl, but if he's fair, they'll have an equal chance.

Introduction

Gender equality rather than gender inequality has become the norm in present-day western society, at least in theory. Women have the same rights as men and ought to have the same chances. The official government standpoint in The Netherlands since 1985 has been that Dutch citizens, men as well as women, should be independent, both economically and in terms of being able to care for themselves (Ministry of Welfare, Health and Culture, 1985). Government campaigns have tried to convince young people of the advantages of combining a career with caring and other responsibilities in the home. This development is not unique to Dutch society; feminist scholars in other Western countries are increasingly pointing out substantial moves towards a more

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'gender-fair culture' (for example, David, *et al.*, 1996). Inequality between the sexes also seems to be gradually disappearing from education. Although horizontal inequality still exists, girls now remain in the education system as long as boys and have quickly caught up with them in terms of level of educational achievement, sometimes even managing to get ahead of them.

The norm of gender equality, however, does not mean that more traditional discourses on masculinity and femininity have disappeared altogether and that social conditions guaranteeing equal opportunities have been realised. Governments can stimulate but not impose gender equality. Thus, different discourses concerning gender relationships function side by side in society—and in education—at the moment. Different cultural and socio-economic groups, moreover, favour different images of masculinity and femininity and contradictory discourses often exist even within such groups. It is in this context that girls and boys are developing gender identities in the last decade of this millennium. They have to come to terms with images, often contradictory, of what a woman or a man is or should be, and negotiate these images into a more or less consistent, personal identity [1]. Youngsters have to accommodate both the fact that gender is an important structuring category in society, produced and maintained in various ways in everyday life, and the fact that many people currently consider gender inequality to be undesirable.

This perspective helped us when trying to understand some of the responses of girls and boys in two studies we conducted in secondary schools in The Netherlands, which we will report on in this article. We were puzzled by the fact that students support the feminist goal of a gender-fair culture, but seemed to show no interest in the analyses of impediments to such a culture that were eye-openers for many feminists of our generation in the late 1970s. The meanings of gender as perceived by students in our research groups scarcely included notions of inequality, and their conviction of equality and their adherence to, in our view, traditional notions of difference often seemed ambivalent to us. The mismatch between the message that feminists try to get across and the experience of girls themselves, which results in a disinclination in girls to follow feminist programmes in education, has recently been the subject of concern and discussion in several publications (for example, Kenway, 1993).

In this article, we scrutinise this mismatch from the point of view of the development of gendered identity in the 1990s. We think that an understanding of current ambivalences in discourses on gender equality/inequality, both at a social and an individual level, provides the key to the development of more effective feminist strategies in education. In our opinion, feminist strategies are still relevant in education as, despite vertical equality between girls and boys, students still receive different messages at school about their capacities, vocation in life and opportunities, and horizontal inequality continues to exist in the form of gender-specific educational choices. However, if feminist strategies are to acquire a place in education, we feel that it is imperative to understand what gender, gender differences, gender inequality and emancipation mean to the present generation of students and to accommodate that meaning in educational practice. For this reason, we think the concept of 'gender identity' is important in the sociology of education.

This tenet is illustrated in this article by interpreting the data of two empirical studies in which girls and boys in secondary education (12–17 years old) talked and wrote about their views on gender equality/inequality and the meaning thereof in their personal lives. How do young people deal with the issue of gender equality/inequality when developing gender identity? A discursive approach towards gender identity, developed in feminist

research during the last 10 years, is used to deal with contradictory images of femininity and masculinity.

In this article, we will first introduce a discursive approach to the development of gender identity. Second, we will discuss our two aforementioned studies, focusing on the meanings girls and boys attribute to gender and interpreting these in terms of the ambivalent character of gender identity in the 1990s. Finally, we will explore the elements required for effective feminist strategies in education.

The Development of Gender Identity: a discursive approach

The formation of gender identity has been of particular interest to developmental psychologists. Their theories are usually related to the question how 'consciousness of gender' develops in early childhood. It is in this period that children acquire the understanding that they are a girl or a boy. Since the 1970s, the question of gender identity has been analysed in depth from a feminist perspective. Mitchell (1974), Chodorow (1978) and Bem (1981), for example, emphasise the social and cultural dimension of the role adopted by girls in the process of becoming a woman. Although they stress that identity is a social phenomenon, identity formation is presented as a more or less linear process with little room for contradiction. Consequently, we feel that these theories are of limited use in understanding the construction of gender identity in a context of conflicting discourses on the relationships between the sexes.

Social constructivist theories in social psychology (Lloyd & Duveen, 1992) offer more possibilities. These researchers argue that identity is derived from the different groups or domains encountered by an individual. The representation of identity is one of the many mediums by which people order their world. Gergen (1985, 1987) and Harré (1983, 1987), in particular, have emphasised the importance of language practices and discourses in the construction of identity. From a sociological perspective of 'socialisation' and 'enculturation', Giddens (1991) has described how the formation of identity has become a continuous process now that traditional identities have failed. The development of identity is a 'lifelong project' in which self-image and how a person sees her/his own life are repeatedly constructed and reconstructed according to the meanings and values that exist in society.

The social constructivist approach provides a useful theoretical framework for our research question, as in this article, we are in search of a dynamic conception of culture and the development of identity. Poststructuralism has been the main source of inspiration to those who have concentrated on this 'discursive' approach to gender and identity which was developed in the course of the 1980s. Scholars have thoroughly expanded it in the context of education in recent years (for example, Davies 1989a,b; Kenway *et al.*, 1994). One of the reasons for the development of a discursive approach to gender identity formation was the dissatisfaction with the framework of 'gender socialisation'. This dissatisfaction was particularly due to the lack of theoretical space for resistance and change [2]. In a discursive approach, the elements of multiple discourses, contradictions and active production of meaning, on both an individual and societal level, together define the possibilities for resistance and change (ten Dam & Volman, 1995).

In contrast with former theories on the development of gender identity, a feminist discursive approach understands gender identity not only as a social product of socialisation processes, but also perceives the concept of gender itself as social. Gender is defined as a layered concept; it is not only a category of individual identity, but also

of symbolic constructions, and a dimension of social relations and social organisation (Scott, 1986). What is considered feminine and masculine is a historical and cultural product, a 'social construction', and is subject to change and internal contradictions. The socially-constructed categories of femininity and masculinity interact in complex ways with other categories, such as ethnicity, class and age (for example, Brah, 1994). At the level of individual identities, this approach implies that girls and boys have to develop and present their sense of self in relation to different discursive practices. As a consequence, there can be no question of an unequivocal 'socialisation' into femininity or masculinity. Individual girls and boys receive different, sometimes even contradictory, messages about femininity and masculinity. Socialisation is no longer seen as a more or less linear process with a fixed and well-defined outcome, but as a process full of contradictions and ambivalences, that is never actually finished (Davies, 1989a,b). In this approach, gender identity may feel and even be relatively constant at an individual level, but it is also multiple, historically changeable and potentially conflictual. Gender identity is never 'achieved' and the 'identity crisis' (cf. Erikson, 1968) never completely resolved. Likewise, 'gender schema' (Bem, 1981) are not definitive but can change with new positions in new discourses.

From a discursive perspective, several authors argue that the development of gender identity occurs within social processes (Davies, 1989a,b; Walkerdine, 1989; Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg, 1994). However, unlike the assumption of social learning theories, children are not considered to be passively shaped by 'active others' (for example, Bandura, 1969) nor by 'social structures' as assumed in sex-role socialisation theories (Chodorow, 1978). In learning to be coherent members of their social worlds, they actively negotiate and live the different gender positions available. They develop a gender identity by participating in the existing discursive practices and by occupying their own place within these. How they do this, however, is not necessarily compatible with the way in which parents and teachers expect them to. Identity is, on the one hand, a social product while, on the other hand, it is not totally determined. The emphasis on children's own activities agrees with the cognitive approach of Kohlberg (1966) and Bem (1981). However, the nature of this activity is seen differently by poststructuralists. It is not conceptualised primarily as the result of cognitive development, but as the need to participate in existing discourses, which are not unequivocal.

In this context, we will look at the data collected for two studies from a discursive perspective in the next section. It is not a strict discourse analysis from a methodological point of view, as the research was not structured in that way. Rather, the focus on gender identity as the constantly changing product of active participation in social discourses provides the discursive framework within which the material is analysed. The studies focus on two subjects that have recently been introduced in Dutch secondary education: women's history and information and computer literacy (ICL). One of the aims of both is to expose students to gender discourses geared towards 'equality'. We will see how students actively negotiate the 'multiple discourses' that result from this confrontation, and how change at the level of gender identity both does and does not occur.

Two Studies on Gender and Equality in Education: women's history and computers

Teachers, student counsellors, researchers and policy makers have worked hard in the past 20 years to achieve equal opportunities for girls and boys. Feminist lobbies in The Netherlands resulted in women's history being made a compulsory examination subject

in all Dutch secondary schools in 1990 and 1991 [3]. One of the arguments supporting the introduction of women's history in secondary education was that it would contribute to girls developing a more positive attitude towards the subject history and to improving their understanding of present-day Western society; in particular, of their own position as women in a society based on gender inequality.

Although it was not prompted by feminist motives, the introduction of the new subject ICL in lower secondary education in The Netherlands in the school year 1993–94 is of particular importance from a feminist point of view. This new subject was accompanied by concern about the participation and achievements of girls in the field of information technology. Both the government and feminist educationalists feared the creation of new 'disadvantages' in a social field that was rapidly growing in importance.

The two subjects are connected with 'gender' in different ways. Gender is an explicit issue in women's history. Although it is not discussed in ICL classes, it is 'present' in the discourse surrounding computers. We asked girls and boys to talk and write about their experiences of these subjects. In this article, we reanalyse what they said and wrote in terms of contradictions in gender identity [4]. A discursive perspective focuses attention on the fact that gender cannot be conceptualised as a monolithic category. Categories such as class and ethnicity interact with the category of gender in complex ways at the level of identity. However, ethnicity and class are not explicitly discussed in our analysis as the research groups of both studies consisted predominantly of white students with few class differences [5]. First, we will briefly describe the research approach and the results relevant to our research question.

Women's History: the research project

The women's history project [6] focused on the impact of teaching women's history on the attitudes of girls and boys towards history and towards themselves as women/men (ten Dam & Rijkschroeff, 1996; ten Dam & Farkas-Teekens, 1997). Teaching materials used in the research project paid attention to the position of women at three levels [7]. Firstly, women were presented in 'masculine' fields. The teaching materials focused on women who played an important role in politics, the arts and intellectual life (e.g. suffragettes and female writers). Secondly, the aim of the teaching materials was the reappraisal of domains traditionally ascribed to women such as the family or birth control. The focus was on 'private' life, which was presented as relevant to society and worth studying. Thirdly, gender was discussed as a social construction. This meant that attention was paid to changes in the meaning of the concept of femininity that had occurred over the years. The emergence and development of new 'women's professions' were discussed, for example, as well as changes in women's appearance, the introduction of technology in the household and the image of women in Hollywood films. In other words, femininity was shown to be dependent on time and culture. By searching for what is called the 'construction of gender' within specific historical contexts and within historiography (see, for example, Scott, 1986), women's history strived to make students sensitive to the way in which meaning, past and present, is given to femininity and masculinity and how this meaning has changed. It also endeavoured to show that the dichotomy man/masculinity and woman/femininity in our society almost always takes the form of hierarchical oppositions in the sense of better–worse, superior–inferior, etc. Students were challenged to reflect on their own gender identity with the help of these theoretical insights.

The learner report methodology was used in the research (see ten Dam & Rijkschroeff,

1996). Students were asked to formulate sentences about the subject which began with 'I have learnt that' or 'I have noticed/discovered that'. Such open questions permit students to expound their own meanings of the subject matter. Not only the learning experiences which were intended, but precisely those *not* intended, the unexpected learning experiences, became apparent in this way. This method also implies that no explicit questions about gender differences were asked. A total of 224 students completed the questionnaires. The learner reports were analysed by compiling 'collective essays', in which the learning experiences of girls and boys were represented.

Girls and Boys Discussing Gender in Women's History

An analysis of the collective essays shows that the first two levels of attention paid to the position of women—women in masculine fields and in domains traditionally associated with women—are reflected in the students' interpretation of the subject matter. The third level—gender as a social construction—is not, however. At the first level, the notion of women as political actors made a deep impression on students. Women's struggle for the right to vote particularly attracted the girls' attention.

> Women have had a hard time. They've had to fight tooth and nail for themselves. Women also had opponents who were against emancipation. (*Girls' essay*)

The perceptibility of women as political actors in the women's history lessons is reflected in the girls' essays:

> Women can also stand up for themselves when they don't agree with men, they really can. I also got to know more about everything that women have done by themselves. (*Girls' essay*)

Boys also referred to women as political actors, but were more inclined to mention their unfortunate position as victims. Moreover, in contrast to the learner reports of girls, boys accompanied their comments about women as political actors by a note of criticism.

> I've noticed that the position of women has changed over the years. Women now have far more freedom in comparison with the past. Women started to develop late. They didn't use to have much say. Women are getting more and more influence. It wasn't easy for them. Women think they've got higher moral standards than men. (*Boys' essay*)

The learner reports also show that most girls found women's lives interesting and worth studying (the second level). They say they 'got to know more about the life women lead' (*girls' essay*).

It is striking, however, that the domains traditionally ascribed to women are not specifically mentioned in the girls' essays. They referred to women's activities in general or negative terms: 'They were too busy', 'It's about women and not about all those wars' (*girls' essay*). The only exception was a girl's comment, in which she distanced herself from the past role of women: 'I can't even start to imagine what the life of a housewife with fourteen kids was like', (*girls' essay*).

Besides making somewhat detached comments on what they had learned in the lessons, boys referred more than once to women's history as a boring subject. The girls were aware of this and it presumably made them feel uncomfortable: 'I've noticed that boys don't really like this subject. [...] I'm not very keen on it either' (*girls' essay*).

Women's history was perceived by both girls and boys as the history of a group

previously in a disadvantaged position which has now emancipated itself. The learner reports reflect an optimistic interpretation of this history: the ideal of equality of the sexes has been more or less realised. The following opinions were expressed in various ways by many girls and to a lesser extent by boys in their learner reports.

> Women now have far more freedom than in the past. (*Boys' essay*)
> We live at a nice time now in which women and men have the same rights. (*Girls' essay*)
> It wasn't as nice then as now. Lots of changes have taken place in women's lives; they won the right to vote, they were allowed to do more, everything became more modern. Life has improved (*Girls' essay*)

The only comment critical of the idea of progress was made by one of the girls:

> Men haven't changed very much, at least some men haven't. They're just the same, some of them. (*Girls' essay*)

The attempts to point out the changes in the meaning of femininity over the years (the third level) in the teaching materials were not very successful. Changes in the meaning of femininity in the period studied were scarcely mentioned at all in the learning experiences. We could only find one or two references to this idea and, once again, it was mostly interpreted in terms of women's rights':

> Women were not allowed to wear a swimming costume, but they did on the quiet. Now they're officially allowed to. (*Girls' essay*)

In the discussion on women's history as a final examination subject, the suggestion that it would have a positive effect on girls' identification with the past has been made many times. We found some confirmation for this assumption in statements like: 'Women's history is really interesting, perhaps because I'm a woman too' (*girls' essay*).

One of the other aims of the introduction of women's history was to achieve a better understanding by girls of gender inequality in present-day society and of their own position in this society. Grever (1991) calls historiography, a political necessity in the process of constructing an identity. This refers not only to the identity of a country or a group, but to the identity of individuals as well. 'Individuals and groups do not find their identity in 'the' historical facts, but form their identity in a reconstruction of the past into the present with views about the future ... *Which* identifying features are emphasised, *which* players are chosen for the historical stage and *how* they are presented, depends on the interests of the historian' (p. 67). In contrast to mainstream historiography, women's history focuses on gender as an important identifying feature.

However, we could find no evidence of girls using history in constructing a gender identity in the way intended by the programme; references to present-day gender inequality were lacking in the learner reports. In the girls' essay, there was only one cautious reference to present-day gender inequality: 'There're still many different opinions on the oppression of women' (*girls' essay*).

The boys who made a link between gender inequality in the past and present-day society were more explicit. Their observations make little or no reference to their own gendered position, however. We will come back to this later in the article.

> They were and are discriminated against. This is still the case (the subordinate position of women). (*Boys' essay*)

The majority of the girls made the link between past and present in one way only: women's struggle is over: 'They won' (*girls' essay*). Girls' perception of the most important

message of women's history was that women are now more equal to men than they were in the past. Thus, teaching women's history has not conveyed the critical insight into the current hierarchical ordering of women/femininity and men/masculinity that was intended. Most female students conclude:

> Women's history is worthwhile, it's good to know something about it, but luckily we live now, not then. (*Girls' essay*)

Virtually none of the girls identified themselves positively with women in the past, especially not with the subordinate role of women. As to the achievements of women in the past, they seemed to be interested in what women did and were proud of the fact that women 'won'. However, this pride was formulated in a detached way: 'they won', not 'we won'.

Information and Computer Literacy: the research project

In this study [8], we collected quantitative data about gender differences in attitudes and achievements in the ICL subject, and qualitative information on the gender-linked ideas about the subject and about themselves developed by students during ICL lessons (Volman, 1997). The study was conducted in 19 lower secondary education classes, where a course on ICL was taught. For the quantitative part of the research, the students completed questionnaires before and after the course. We were interested in how their attitudes towards and knowledge of computers had changed during the course. An exploratory analysis of the development of gender-linked meanings pertaining to computers and ICL was made on the basis of interviews with girls and boys, and on classroom observations in the 19 classes participating in the quantitative study.

Girls and Boys Discussing Gender in ICL

Systematic differences between girls and boys were apparent in both the quantitative and the qualitative parts of the research. We will briefly mention the most striking quantitative results, as they illustrate how gender inequality is manifested in the ICL subject. After the course, it appeared that gender differences in knowledge about computers had decreased on average. However, the difference between girls and boys in enjoyment of computers after the course had increased in favour of the boys. Moreover, the boys' estimation of their own competence in the subject ICL was higher than that of the girls.

There were also clear differences between girls and boys in the interviews. Boys talked more and with more enthusiasm and imagination than girls; they boasted more about their knowledge of computers and technological developments, using computer jargon and explaining to the female interviewer what computers can do. Knowing a lot about computers and being skillful players of computer games seemed to make them feel good. Most boys were convinced of their competence in using computers, which was quite the reverse for girls. They attributed problems with the computer to their own failure and certainly avoided showing any signs of expertise about computers. Girls talked in a 'down to earth' way about the importance and possibilities of computers and thought that they were 'just handy things'. When something went wrong in the lesson, however, they seemed to put on a show of helplessness.

We explicitly asked the students how they perceived gender differences in relation to

computers and ICL. They pointed out differences between girls and boys in their use of the computer and girls, in particular, were aware of gender-specific behaviour and interest in computers on the part of boys.

> Girls have got lots of other things to do, like they're interested in going out and shopping. (*Girl*)

In most of the classes, girls pointed out that 'being able to do something with the computer' contributed to boys' self image.

> *Girl 1:* Some boys just sit there as if to say: 'Look at me then, I can do it'. Sitting in front of a computer makes boys feel macho.
> *Girl 2:* You know like: 'I'm good at it', and sometimes it's even true.
> *Girl 1:* Anthony and John, they always bring floppies with them, as if to say, 'I've got a new this or that'.

Several social and historical explanations were given for the fact that boys are more attracted to playing computer games than girls.

> It's like other toys. Like boys aren't used to playing with dolls and things. (*Girls*)
> Lots of computer games are about a boy and not about girls. I think that girls aren't so interested then. (*Boy*)
> Parents don't buy as many computer games for girls. (*Girl*)
> Boys are much cleverer at it because they've been interested in it for much longer. (*Girl*)

However, when the subject of 'gender differences' was explicitly introduced by the interviewer, the majority of students strongly repudiated the existence of differences between girls and boys. They denied the existence of different capacities and the role of the individual was emphasised in explaining differences in interest. Every individual can be different 'if he or she wants to be'. Suddenly, no contextual or historical explanations were given. Students would only discuss gender differences in individual terms. They saw gender-specific preferences and behaviour as a question of individual choice.

> There aren't any differences between boys and girls. Girls who're interested can do it [work with computers] as well as boys, but I think they're just less interested in computers. (*Boy*)

Now and again, complicated arguments were used to maintain this position: in response to the question 'who knows the most about computers?', 'Boys, I think ... but not anymore' (*girl*); in response to the question 'who can use computers the best?', 'Both if they can do it' (*boy*), 'It doesn't make any difference to me. But I think boys' (*girl*); in response to the question 'do you know girls who use the computer a lot?', 'Yes, maybe girls aren't as interested, but that's looking at it for the whole country, I don't know, you'd have to do some research on it' (*boy*).

Students seem to be cautious of 'discriminating' or 'being unfair' when talking about gender differences. Boys, especially, do not want to give the impression that they think girls are stupid: 'Girls maybe know more in other classes. On average I think it's equal.'

Students' reluctance to see inequality as a hierarchical difference became even more apparent when gender inequality (as opposed to gender differences) was discussed. As in the research on women's history, students made a sharp distinction between their generation, in which gender inequality and discrimination no longer exist, and 'days gone by', when 'old-fashioned people' still thought that women were worth less than men. Hence, one girl's view on women's chances of getting a job in computers:

> Only an old-fashioned boss who's never heard about equal opportunities would prefer to appoint a boy rather than a girl, but if he's fair, they'll have an equal chance. (*Girl*)

Students clearly had less trouble with gender differences in the past or even in relation to their parents' generation. Many, particularly boys, talked about their father as a computer expert or as an interested PC user, whereas mothers were described as 'knowing nothing about computers' or being 'against computers'.

> *Boy 1:* My mother's never touched a computer (this made boy 2 laugh a lot and boy 1 continued) She doesn't even dare touch the computer.
>
> *Boy 2:* I think our Dad does like computers and finds them interesting. Our Mum, okay the computer's there, but the most she'll do is wipe a duster over it and that's it.

As many had anticipated, the research has shown that a gender difference is emerging in the ICL subject. It is not so much a difference in educational achievement, however, but in attitude, or, in the terms of this article, in gender identity, a level which is far more difficult to grasp than achievements. Girls and boys related to the subject very differently. In general the boys liked it: 'Doing things on the computer, I really like that.' They portrayed themselves as experts.

> I've already got a bit of experience. It was the first lesson today and it was about really easy things. But later on we're going to write programs and I think that'll be really interesting.

The words they used betrayed that their stories were not always based on knowledge, however.

> You can do complicated mathematical calculations much faster, like involution of roots from back to front.
>
> I think computers are interesting. There's fantastic technology inside them.

Girls, on the contrary, often presented themselves as less expert than they actually were:

> I don't understand ICL very well. I got $6\frac{1}{2}$ for my test but that wasn't really about computers, but about sorting.

They also avoided the use of computer terms and seem to enjoy acts of 'helplessness':

> When it suddenly went off, I thought: I did that because I don't know very much about it. I thought: I pressed the wrong key of course.
>
> Then it suddenly starts beeping and then I think: 'Oh help, the thing'll blow up in a minute'.

They said they did not really like the subject, especially because it was so difficult:

> I don't think I'm any good at it—I think you've just got to understand computers, and I don't think I do.

With their attitude towards the subject and their helpless and expert behaviour, girls and boys invariably adopted a typically feminine and masculine attitude towards information technology. Boys seemed to use the classroom environment to practise a typical masculine form of communication—exchanging information on technology and on their technical skills (Cockburn, 1985; Wajcman, 1991)—without actually having mastered the skills and knowledge presupposed in the discourses they use. For girls, it was not communication about computer expertise they 'practised' in the classroom, but about their inexpertise. Girls and boys seemed to use the ICL subject and the computer to

shape their gender identities. The computer is, on the one hand, a suitable object to use in the construction of gender identity because of its association with masculinity. On the other hand, the computer acquired new gendered meanings in this process, and girls and boys attached different meanings to ICL. Enjoyment of, and especially abilities in, this subject became gendered phenomena. Whereas the students participating in the women's history project seemed to reject the elements for building gender identity that were offered to them in the lessons, the ICL students included elements of an attitude towards ICL in their gender identity in a way that policy makers had wanted to prevent.

At a conscious level, we saw that gender differences were only accepted under certain conditions; namely, when it was the result of the free choice of the persons concerned. The notion of gender inequality was only accepted as a phenomenon from the past, not as a factor in the lives of the students themselves, which was similar to what we saw in the women's history project.

> I think that people want to be fair these days. (*Girl*)

Boys wanted to avoid every semblance of discrimination:

> Men and women are equal. That woman is maybe even better. (*Boy*)

Girls did not want to see themselves as the victims of discrimination and felt they were able to deal with acts of discrimination.

> *Girl 1:* If I was better than a boy at an interview for a job and the boss appointed him, then I'd get really angry.
> *Girl 2:* (indignantly): That'd be discrimination.

Contradictory Discourses and Gender Identity

In a discursive approach to identity, inconsistency is interpreted as complexity, an expression of the fact that an individual participates in conflicting discourses. Inconsistency does not necessarily mean that someone experiences herself/himself as inconsistent. The fact that the symbolic representation of gender has increased in complexity and ambiguity does not imply that 'identities are more volatile and unstable in a psychological sense' (Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg, 1994). Fragmented identity can even function harmoniously (cf. Giddens, 1991). Individuals will generally endeavour to perceive themselves as consistent and coherent.

From a discursive approach, the statements and actions of the youngsters in the research can be interpreted in the following way. Students construct an identity on the basis of the meanings available to them. Femininity and masculinity are important elements in this. The meanings of femininity and masculinity as encountered in the youngsters' environment are, however, far from unequivocal and have never appeared to be so ambivalent as in the 1990s. Owing to changes in the social relationships between the sexes, youngsters must also deal with the theme of gender inequality in the context of the development of their gender identity. The message seems to be: you must be a girl or a boy, but traditional gender identities are no longer desirable. This message has gradually permeated the youth culture, advertising and the hidden curriculum in schools. Multiple forms of masculinity and femininity exist, but the legitimacy of difference between gender groups that implies inequality is under pressure, whereas equality in the sense of sameness is unthinkable.

Which discourses concerning gender relations can be reconstructed from the stories told by the students in our study? In the first place, the need for youngsters to present

themselves as female or male in the traditional meaning of gender identity development and the need to distinguish between girls and boys as groups are obvious. You could call this a *gender difference* discourse. We saw, for example, how girls and boys seem to use the ICL subject and the computer to shape their gender identities. This discourse is acted out and mentioned in everyday life, but is virtually never actually discussed. It was discussed by the girls, however, when they commented on the way their male classmates include knowledge and skill about computers in their gender identity, thus showing a good deal of psychological insight. Virtually the only time we encountered this discourse was in the ICL project, where 'gender' was *not* a learning objective. On the other hand, in women's history, gender inequality/equality and gender differences were continually seen as a problem in the curriculum. Paradoxically, students do not mention having discussed contemporary gender differences in these lessons.

Besides the gender-difference discourse, the students in our studies made sense of their experiences with the help of an *emancipated or equality* discourse. They cherished the principle that women and men are equal. This discourse is particularly prominent when youngsters talk about themselves and each other in terms of gender, i.e. when gender as a theme is under discussion. Hence, this discourse was prominent in the women's history project and in the ICL project when the subject 'gender differences' was explicitly introduced by the interviewer. Students expressed in various ways that 'luckily we live at a time when girls and boys can choose what they want to be'. The emancipated or equality discourse is closely interwoven with the liberal discourse which emphasises that people can shape their own lives regardless of external factors. The notion of 'free choice' fits in with the process of individualisation that typifies the end of this century. Individuals must be more capable than ever before of deciding how they want to run their lives, regardless of the social constraints of family, social class and sex. That citizens often do not have the necessary material conditions and resources to fulfil this demand scarcely detracts from the ideological strength of this discourse, which has acquired a hegemonic position in a comparatively short time. On the other hand, there is a certain power in the matter-of-factness with which girls feel they have the same entitlement to equal rights as boys, and in their conviction that they can be themselves and can act according to their own interests and choices.

Finally, teachers and researchers presented a *feminist or inequality* discourse, which emphasises the thesis that gender inequality is still a social problem, to students in women's history lessons and the ICL interviews. More generally, this discourse provides a potential frame of reference for young people today, both within and outside education. Our research, however, shows that students only make frugal use of this discourse. Although no explicit use of this discourse was made, girls in the women's history project expressed pride in the way women overcame inequality, and girls in the ICL project responded indignantly to the suggestion of discrimination.

The difference, equality and inequality discourses are contradictory discourses at a societal level. At the level of individual gender identity, however, we saw that girls and boys look for 'solutions' to enable them to cope with inconsistencies and contradictions [9]. Girls run the risk of incorporating disadvantage or being a victim in their female identity by participating in the feminist discourse. This is not positive identification. While identification with feminism 10 years ago could be a source of pleasure to youngsters with leftist or progressive convictions, the association between 'feminism' and 'progressive' and 'that's where "it" all happens' no longer exists.

The need to avoid negative identification appeared to induce girls to reproduce the subject matter on gender inequality—an inequality discourse—learnt in women's history

lessons, without relating it to themselves; they could not and would not place it in the context of their own experience. The repetitive nature of statements in the learner reports like 'we live at a nice time now in which women and men have the same rights' seems to indicate a magical formula. What this magical formula is meant to ward off is the threat of belonging to a group which in the eyes of girls (and boys) is associated with a 'deficiency'. Girls are disinclined to identify with 'a group that is lagging behind'. Belonging to such a group undermines a carefully constructed image of equality. It seems as if the students can only think of gender inequality as a problem that has already been solved. Statements made by girls in the ICL research, in which they describe discrimination as a misconception of old-fashioned individuals, can be interpreted as an expression of how youngsters deal with ambivalent discourses and with discrepancies between discourses and practical situations.

We consider this search for 'solutions' by girls and boys, in which they reconcile inconsistent and contradictory systems of meaning, as the ongoing quest for a harmonious gender identity, a process in which identity is continuously constructed and reconstructed, and conflicting and asynchronous aspects are moulded into a personally meaningful whole. This results in aspects of gender identities which were unthinkable for women of our generation. Pride in what women have achieved, conviction about one's rights and confidence in the legitimacy of one's choices may not always seem appropriate to us, but are nevertheless potentially-empowering elements in the gender identities of girls in our research groups.

Discussion

We are not alone in pointing out changing discourses on gender and gender inequality. David *et al.* (1996) saw indications of a transformed school culture, 'with many girls and young women exhibiting confidence about their abilities and future, especially in terms of employment, and boys and young men more sensitive to gender and equality debates' (p. 8). Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg (1994) were, like us, confronted with contradictory reactions in a study on girls' socialisation. On the one hand, girls described boys as 'mean and dominant'; on the other hand, they thought of gender roles as 'hopelessly old-fashioned'. 'Today we are all first and foremost individuals, you see' (p. 1). The interpretation of such changes differs, however. While David *et al.* (1996) see a trend towards a more gender-fair culture, Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg (1994) avoid mentioning progression but describe the phenomenon as the simple co-existence of different discourses.

We feel that neither of these interpretations are conclusive. The idea that things are improving is, in our opinion, too optimistic; the observation that there simply are ambivalences is too relativist. How students mould these discourses into meaningful entities is following a particular course. Our research showed that the idea that women and men are equal and that individuals have freedom of choice is clearly the dominant discourse at the present time. On the one hand, this is an empowering notion for girls, clearly reflected in their conviction that they shape their lives in the way they want. Boys and girls, on the other hand, seemed to have difficulty naming phenomena that do not fall within this dominant discourse. Gender inequality does still exist, however, despite the dominance of the emancipated discourse that emphasises individual freedom of choice. The results of our studies made us, as feminists, feel concerned that gender inequality may become invisible and hence 'not discussible'. For example, the helpless behaviour of girls in ICL classes contributes to their exclusion from the technological

developments that are increasingly important in today's society. However, girls and boys think that they are merely behaving according to their own free will and interests.

Another form of inequality stems from the fact that the contradictions that have been identified at the level of identity do not occur to the same extent and in the same way in relation to girls and to boys. The social role of women is the subject of discussion owing to the influence of emancipation processes. New identities are on the whole considered desirable for girls. Such changes and contradictions are far less common for men. The 'emancipated discourses' of the 1990s, therefore, have different meanings for girls and boys. Thus, the freedom of choice discussed by students in the ICL interviews refers to the choices open to girls to do something different to what women have done for so long. Unlike women of previous generations, girls today can decide for themselves whether they make 'traditionally female' choices or 'modern gender-neutral' choices. That the behaviour and choices of boys are not gender-neutral either, often remains undiscussed. They are not required to view themselves in such terms. While girls are wrestling with taking on what were previously 'masculine positions', there are still few indications that 'caring', for example, will become part of the gender identity of boys (ten Dam & Volman, 1995). For boys, the emancipated discourse primarily means that they do not discriminate against girls.

Our research results show that young people are no longer brought up with discourses that explicitly legitimise gender inequality, but neither do they have access to discourses that effectively acknowledge, explain and oppose gender inequality. Inequality is old fashioned, it is not part of students' lives, but a phenomenon of the past. They try to avoid any impression of unfairness and discrimination. Many students appear unable to make a distinction between identifying differences and sanctioning them, between descriptive statements and normative statements. They refuse to describe gender differences because they think that gender differences should not exist.

The conclusion that contradictory discourses do function simultaneously is, therefore, analytically correct, but that is not the end of the story. Nothing has yet been said about the dominance of discourses and their desirability. It is precisely the question of feminist strategies in education that demands we go a step further than this confirmation. Davies (1993) showed how school children can be given access to discourses which enable them to reflect on traditional gender discourse. To this end, Davies used discourses about the constitution of gender. She tried to develop the capacity in children to deconstruct dominant storylines about gender. But, if it is possible to do this kind of work with children, why was women's history, which aimed to offer alternative gender discourses to older students with greater cognitive capacities, not successful in this respect? The answer might be that pre-prepared meanings were presented in these lessons; no attempt at deconstruction was made *with* the students, a process in which they would have been invited to formulate their own meanings (Kenway, 1993). Another factor might be that for adolescents there is more pleasure in being a 'real' boy or a 'real' girl, whereas school children experimenting with gender 'bending' and reflecting on it, may be more of a challenge.

The problem with the ICL subject was of a different nature. This is a subject with cultural connotations of masculinity and its introduction was accompanied by warnings about the creation of stereotypical gender relationships, in particular of a 'girls' problem'. 'Gender' was not mentioned in relation to this subject in the classroom, however. Neither the implicit masculine connotations of the subject nor the implicit message that stereotypical gender relationships are the 'problem of the girls' were openly contested. This did not have a positive influence on girls' involvement with the subject ICL.

Finally, it is probably significant that in both cases the girls in our studies are from a generation that is told about gender inequality before consciously experiencing it themselves. Moreover, current feeling tends to associate 'disadvantage' with individual 'losers' rather than seeing it as a reason for collective strife. The stereotypical image of a victim-like, complaining feminist, promoted by the backlash to feminism, is unlikely to attract girls to identify with it. Boys are able to agree with the equal rights of girls with virtually no commitment on their behalf.

In summary, it could be suggested that the limited attraction of feminist ideas in education can be attributed to the fact that insufficient attention has been paid to what 'gender' actually means to the present generation of students. While feminists from our generation are inclined to argue from the point of view of inequality, young people in the 1990s feel that it is old-fashioned to be addressed as 'unequal'. All kinds of contradictory discourses function at a societal level: 'difference discourses', 'equality or emancipated discourses' and 'inequality or feminist discourses'. These all have some kind of a place in gender identities of young people. In our interviews and learner reports, these discourses and the frictions between them were very apparent. With an eye to change, feminist strategies must be developed which take into account these frictions in the gender identities of girls and boys. An inequality discourse alone is not sufficient; the importance of 'difference', the process of becoming women and men which plays such an important role at this age, and the fact that equality is the norm which young people grow up with must all be articulated.

From listening to the girls and boys participating in our studies, we derived two global guidelines for more effective feminist strategies for change in education. First, instead of simply presenting new storylines, it seems important to work *with* students to deconstruct traditional narratives about gender and to construct alternative ones that are compatible with the strength of their own views of gender. Second, attempts to convince students of the necessity of emancipation may be counterproductive, as they already consider themselves to be emancipated. It puts girls in the position of the victim and, therefore, is more likely to put them off than contribute to 'emancipation'.

The objective of feminist strategies for change could possibly be that young people develop an identity in which they think positively about themselves as a human being of a particular sex, and at the same time to be aware of social structures which enable undesirable differences between the sexes to be maintained. They must be able to deal with and change inequality now and in the future without seeing themselves as the victim or the perpetrator. This requires reflective discourses in which difference, equality and inequality can be discussed.

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NOTES

[1] The fact that individuals can no longer turn to a structured framework of values in relation to the development of identity is not specifically related to gender issues. A process of individualisation is in progress at the present time, in which 'the clear reproduction of meanings and definitions' (Habermas, 1985) has been thrown wide open to discussion.

[2] The concept of socialisation has recently been defended again (for example, Duindam, 1993). Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg (1994) point out that 'to hold on to a concept of socialisation does not necessarily

signify that socialisation is "total" or without resistance. To hold on to a concept of identity is not the same as saying that identity is unchangeable or without conflict.'

[3] In The Netherlands, two topics are chosen every year for the final written examination in history and political science for all students taking history at secondary school. In 1990–91, students in vocational education and general secondary education studied the position of women in The Netherlands and the US during the period 1929–69. This comprehensive effort to include gender in the curriculum of secondary education was the result of a very intensive lobby of women's history scholars.

[4] We realise that the situation in which an identity is expressed determines what is said about that identity. Students draw on different discourses in different situations. Thus, identity construction rather than identity reproduction occurs during interviews and the completion of questionnaires.

[5] Both studies were conducted in the higher levels of secondary education which may explain the lack of differentiation in the social background of students.

[6] The research project was subsidised by the Ministry of Education.

[7] The research was designed as an experimental study. Teaching materials were developed to facilitate different ways of teaching—a 'female-friendly' method and a regular teaching method—both women's history and traditional history. Thus, four teaching kits were produced: women's history taught in a 'female-friendly' way; women's history taught in a regular way; traditional history taught in a 'female-friendly' way; traditional history taught in a regular way. In this article, we only analyse the learning experiences of the students working with the women's history teaching kits.

[8] This project was subsidised by the Belle van Zuylen Instituut of the University of Amsterdam.

[9] They do this in different ways of course. Girls and boys do not form homogeneous groups. In this article, however, we explore the common factors linked with gender.

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